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Blame Nixon for Moscow Embassy Deal

The American people have every right to be disgusted at the way their government allowed the Soviet Union to build a new embassy on a hill overlooking the White House, the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency—while a new U.S. embassy surrounded by skyscrapers in downtown Moscow was being prefabricated off-site by Soviet workers who honeycombed it with KGB “bugs.”

The public also has a right to know who was responsible for the agreement that made this lopsided result not only possible but inevitable. It's time someone named names, and we'll offer three for starters: Nixon, Kissinger and Rogers.

Richard M. Nixon has enough to answer for, and it seems almost cruel to chip away at the one area where he has been generally regarded as competent: foreign relations, particularly with the communist bloc. But the fact is that the embassy deal can be laid directly on Nixon's doorstep.

If Nixon, his national security adviser, Henry A. Kissinger, and his secretary of state, William P. Rogers, want credit for detente, they must also take responsibility for its unfortunate results. One was the ill-advised embassy agreement, rushed to fruition over objections of lower-level officials who wanted a genuinely reciprocal arrangement.

We reported in 1975 that, three years earlier, Kissinger had insisted “for the sake of detente” that U.S. negotiators sign an agreement on the embassies. A recent State Department chronology of the negotiations confirmed this, adding that in July 1972, “a seven-man interagency team concluded two exhausting weeks of discussion with

the Soviets and agreed to a long list of conditions.” The crucial U.S. concession was that Soviet labor and materials be used for the Moscow embassy.

“As the differences between the two sides narrowed, pressures to conclude an agreement increased,” the report notes. “On Oct. 3, 1972, at the height of detente, the State Department got word from the White House that the president wanted an agreement on conditions of construction before Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko left the U.S. for Moscow the next day.”

That was beyond the bureaucracy's ability, but within two months the deal was cut, thanks to Rogers. “After 3½ years of negotiations,” the document relates, “Secretary of State Rogers personally intervened. In a Dec. 1, 1972, memorandum to Rogers . . . Assistant Secretary [Walter] Stoessel stated: ‘Yesterday, you directed me to sign the agreement on the Condition of Construction of Embassy Complexes.’ ”

The agreement was signed on Dec. 4 and Nixon sent Rogers a congratulatory note. Thus it was that the Nixon administration, which prided itself on knowing how to “handle” communist regimes, signed a sucker's deal that led inexorably to the situation today, when President Reagan has said the unfinished embassy may have to be demolished.

In an attempt to mitigate the embarrassment of the bad deal, the State Department report notes: “It would have cost too much to import an ‘army’ of American construction workers to build our compound.” At last count, the unfinished, unusable embassy has cost \$190 million—almost double the original estimate.